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ABSTRACT

Information on current trends and issues informally discussed and then delineated by the directors of six National Council of Teachers of English commissions, is presented in this 10th annual report. The commissions and their directors are: (1) Commission on Language (Vivian Davis); (2) Commission on Composition (Marilyn Cooper); (3) Commission on Literature (Reginald Martin); (4) Commission on Reading (Patrick Shannon); (5) Commission on Media (Carole Cox); and (6) Commission on Curriculum (Richard Adler). Some of the subjects discussed in the report include: the reemergence of attention to language as a foundation for curriculum and instruction; the necessity for critical evaluation of how language arts texts portray the nature of language and language variation; support for writing across the curriculum; excessive teaching loads of two-year college instructors; concern about the development of national standards and testing; what should be included and excluded in multicultural literature programs; the continuing debate about assessment; inclusion of media literacy in teacher education programs; the pedagogical implications of multimedia; more extensive involvement of teachers in ongoing curriculum development; the changing role of talk in the classroom; and the need for literature instruction at all levels centering on personal and aesthetic responses rather then answering factual questions and/or teaching isolated skills. (NKA)

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TRENDS AND ISSUES IN ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, 1993--SIX SUMMARIES

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TRENDS AND ISSUES IN ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, 1993--SIX SUMMARIES

Summaries of Informal Annual Discussions of the Commissions of the National Council of Teachers of English.

During their meetings at the recent Annual Convention, the six NCTE commissions informally discussed professional trends and issues. While the ideas below do not constitute official positions of NCTE or unanimous opinions of a particular commission, they do offer challenging, informed points of view. This is the tenth annual trends and issues report by the commissions.

The Commission on Language (Vivian Davis, Director) applauds the recent increase in attention to the social and critical dimensions of language. Outside the United States, renewed interest in language manifests itself through genre theory, critical language study, and critical language awareness, including studies of language and ideology and inquiry-based sociolinguistic study by students. In the United States and Canada, the emphasis has been on how classroom instructional conversations can enhance student achievement, especially in reading and writing, and on the implications of studies of bilingual and ESL education for education in general. The Commission recognizes and welcomes this re-emergence of attention to language as a foundation for curriculum and instruction.

The Commission urges the publication of manuscripts from scholars studying in the areas of bilingual education and ESL. The publication of research studies, literature, and

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educational practices that reflect current knowledge gained from the scholarship developed in meeting the language needs of our society--which includes a growing population of trilingual and ESL learners--will also provide basic data and strategies for all language arts teaching and learning.

The study of language arts and the teaching of English is becoming more inclusive of multiculturalism and language variation, yet textbooks continue to play an essential traditional role in the educational socialization of American school children. In the view of the Commission, therefore, it is critical to evaluate how language arts texts are portraying the nature of language and language variation. The Commission recommends a survey of a sample of current language arts texts and the development of recommendations for the guidance of textbook writers who represent language and language variation in their texts.

"Language Awareness Programs" (LAPs) are used in many Western European countries to introduce students to the nature of language variation and language use in society. The goal of LAPs is to provide an informed knowledge base and to effect attitudinal change about language differences. Given the current attitudes and language education policies in the United States, the Commission recommends LAPs as important resources in designing the type of language curricula that can help American schools realize their avowed commitment, which NCTE emphasizes and supports, to multicultural and multilinguistic education.

The Commission again warns that standardized assessments of student progress,

especially in language arts, almost certainly result in standardized curricula and threaten creative uses of language by students and teachers. Standardized testing always presents the dangerous probability of limiting students' opportunities to use language to learn language.

The Commission applauds NCTE's move away from the study of grammar as the study of language structure. Nonetheless, it must point to the neglect of some of the essential insights and applications to be derived from the study of "functional linguistics." The Commission encourages the study of language as a communicative event which includes intentions, values, and beliefs that shape the selection of particular language structures. Insights from such language study can have important implications for the examination of literature, rhetoric, and language.

Full and positive participation in a democratic society that is increasingly information-complex demands that citizens be in control of--not controlled by--visual as well as verbal language. Traditionally, teachers focus on the verbal, linear, discursive language required by written and oral texts. Too often they neglect or minimize two-dimensional texts such as billboards, diagrams, drawings, maps, tables, graphs, and photographs and such three-dimensional texts as films, videos and television. In reality, we interact daily with visual texts which inform, persuade, and otherwise affect us in the same ways that written texts do. The Language Commission urges opportunities for teachers to broaden their understanding of visual language and encourages teachers to significantly incorporate visual texts in their classroom practice.

In order to foster language development in students, including those whose first language is other than English, teachers need to understand how we acquire language and literacy. The Commission stresses the need for teachers to be informed by research on issues related to language acquisition and literacy so that they can make sound pedagogical decisions about curriculum, assignments, and strategies for teaching and evaluating language development.

The Commission, cognizant that teachers learn best from each other in informal settings, urges schools to structure time into the workday for teachers to collaborate, design curricula, and share approaches for the improvement of language arts teaching.

The Commission is especially concerned about the two-year college language arts instructor who is generally expected to teach five or more classes and provided little to no opportunity to participate in focused professional development activities that help teachers keep current in their disciplines and/or improve their teaching. Because of the economy, more and more students will attend two-year colleges. Many of them will eventually transfer to four-year institutions and become language arts teachers themselves. Others will receive no further college instruction. It is therefore critical that language arts instruction in the two-year college be of the highest quality and state-of-the-knowledge.

The Commission advocates relieving two-year college instructors of their excessive teaching loads and providing them a variety of structured opportunities to improve their teaching and enlarge their knowledge base. Without such changes, the language arts

education of the next generation of students who attend two-year colleges will be compromised.

The Commission on Composition (Marilyn Cooper, Director) believes that the central goal of writing classes in American schools and colleges is the **improvement of public discourse.** The ability to continue to learn through literacy and to engage in discussion of public issues is essential for citizens in a democratic society. Writing teachers have a responsibility to instruct students in and encourage the kind of full discussion of issues that leads to reasoned and democratic decision making. In writing classes (though not solely there), students should learn how to argue from information as well as from opinion and values, to define terms, and to argue logically; they should use reading and writing to investigate how their private lives intersect with their school and work lives; they should learn how to negotiate and make choices when confronted with language standards. At the same time, as writing teachers insist on the integrity of literacy skills with social responsibilities, we must remember that our goal is to encourage students to develop those abilities and habits that lead to productive discussion, not to impose our own ideas. Writing teachers need to encourage productive dissent in discussions, the free expression of doubt and difference, and to discourage any tactics--including offensive expressions of racism and sexism--that are designed to silence others.

The Commission also continues to be concerned about the development of **national standards and testing.** As we argued last year, such programs tend to reduce writing to a mechanical skill rather than an analytic tool and means of thought and to discriminate against students and teachers who are different from those elite groups who devise the

means of assessment. We are also concerned that the vast amounts of money that go into the development of such programs primarily assure the profits of testing businesses and could more productively be spent locally on programs, resources, and facilities, such as the development of local materials, professional development for teachers, and improving library technologies and holdings. Nevertheless, the Commission also recognizes that national standards are being developed, and we applaud the efforts of NCTE to participate responsibly in selected programs. We encourage full and ongoing involvement in the development of any programs to which NCTE finally gives its approval and we urge inclusion of writing teachers of diverse backgrounds in the development process.

We are also concerned that budgetary constraints have had a serious effect on the teaching of writing over the past several years, and we urge that more effort and funds be devoted to **improving the conditions for teaching writing** in schools and colleges. Class size has risen at all levels, and some of the new business-run private schools, encouraged in their competition with the public schools by such proposals as educational vouchers, see higher teacher-student ratios as a mark of efficiency. Large classes are not efficient--nor effective--in teaching anything, and they are particularly damaging to the teaching of writing, which depends heavily on one-to-one interaction between teacher and students. In the schools, mainstreaming of special needs students has very often not been accompanied by lowering class size or providing extra support for the teacher; we urge that more effort go into providing support for teachers of mainstreamed classes, including co-teaching, professional development, and smaller class sizes. In colleges and universities, the use of part-time faculty to teach writing classes has been increasing in

response to budgetary restrictions. The low pay for such positions, in addition to the large class sizes, result in part-time writing teachers struggling to teach two or three times as many students per week than recommended by the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Institutions of higher education must review and rethink their curricula and their employment practices if they are to make good on their commitment to fully develop the writing abilities of students.

Finally, the Commission urges consideration of a variety of areas in which care must be taken to make sure that teaching methods are appropriate to and enhance what is known about the acquisition of literacy skills. We note a trend in some education schools to cut back on requirements for particular **methods courses** for prospective teachers in favor of content courses; this problem is most serious for elementary teachers whose generic methods courses do not give them training in teaching writing as a process. We support the use of **computers** in teaching writing and the establishment of computer labs dedicated to writing as long as the technology is used to support interactive and reflective writing and not as a substitute for teachers or for materials and library resources essential for good writing classes. We applaud the movement in language arts to include teaching of **spelling, grammar, and vocabulary** within the context of the student's writing, and we urge that nonphonetic aspects of spelling such as morphology be given more attention. We continue to advocate the use of **portfolios** in teaching writing as long as portfolios express writing as a reflective, negotiated process: in compiling a writing portfolio, students should be required to select from and reflect on their writing, rather than just collect everything they've written in a course. We support the development of **writing-across-the-curriculum** at all levels as long as such programs

are not seen as replacements for the explicit teaching of writing. The integration of writing into teaching of other content areas has sometimes led to students doing all their writing in learning logs or in reflective, exploratory journals; to the promotion of narrative over expository writing; and to the connection of writing only to literature classes, to the exclusion of science and social studies classes. Students should learn to use writing as a means of learning in all their classes, but they must learn to do formal expository writing in a variety of genres as well.

The Commission on Literature (Reginald Martin, Director) identified six key trends or issues for our area, and two minor trends for consideration:

1) **Multiculturalism:** (Considerations): What should we include and exclude? Inclusion should not be superficial. What are optimal goals for a teacher who wishes to infuse multicultural studies into the curriculum? Is it essential to combine familiar and less-familiar texts? Our primary goal should be to create lifetime readers and writers of multicultural texts.

a) Gender Awareness and Sexual Orientation Awareness in Text Selection: It is important that literature teachers be broadbased and ecumenical in these areas of text selection.

b) Censorship: Literature teachers need a well-funded, proactive lobby; this lobby would argue for principles of inclusion and against censorship as a

tool of exclusion.

2) **Literature and Writing Instruction:** We must learn to combine the enabling of reading and writing practices in our literature classrooms; relatedly, commission members made the suggestion that all commission directors meet on the afternoon of the second day in a forum open to all members to detail the larger issues their groups have listed.

3) **Assessment:** Where and when should assessment occur? What are the proper ways to assess literature?

4) **Recommendations to New Administrators:** All schools must achieve minimal literacy. Libraries should serve as both knowledge centers and remedial centers for all types of learning media.

5) **Technology:** Technology and books should be combined to form a new kind of instructive text. Technology and books should not be placed in competition with each other for the sake of fads or commercialism. We must also be aware of both the direct and indirect dangers of some new technology, such as an over-dependence on graphics for learning and passive radiation from powerful computers.

6) **Literary Interpretation and Leaderless Groups:** Literature teachers must learn to empower students to teach themselves.

The Commission on Reading (Patrick Shannon, Director) strongly supports the draft document produced by the NCTE/IRA task force on literacy assessment which suggests that educators adopt a pragmatic view of assessment by paying less attention to psychometric constructs and more attention to social, intellectual, and political consequences of reading assessment upon students. We believe that this document should direct NCTE's efforts concerning literacy and that it will focus the issue of assessment where it should be--on the interests and welfare of students. NCTE can use this document to inform the debate about assessment in America.

At the same time, we reiterate our concern about national standards and testing for English/language arts. We caution the NCTE/IRA/Center for the Study of Reading Joint Task Force on Standards to look carefully at the intentions and interests of those in business and government who advocate national standards and assessments as a means for protecting America against a slide toward third world status. American schools are not culpable in economic decline or recovery, and school standards and assessments are not substitutes for sound governmental and business policies and practices. NCTE and all educators must think carefully about the consequences of these standards and assessments in light of the exclusionary history of schooling in America. Why should we expect that a new set of standards will defy history? We applaud the efforts to ensure representation on the Task Force from social groups traditionally poorly served by schools.

Finally, we are concerned about the recent debates about and court challenges to the ways in which schools are funded within and across school districts and states. The

financial inequities among school districts are appalling and detrimental to students' literacy development. NCTE should become more active in this debate, taking the side of the underfunded. Within school districts, we find alarming the fact that only 61 percent of school budgets directly impact upon classrooms in American schools. NCTE should join with other professional organizations to strike a task force on school funding and its effects on English/language arts programs. Such a task force could break new ground for the NCTE and would have important positive consequences for American students.

The Commission on Media (Carole Cox, Director) sees a trend toward decentering English as a case for the centrality of media in an interdisciplinary context of critical interpretation. The Commission agrees on the importance of developing methodology based on conceptualizing the areas where media education can be situated, such as cultural studies, popular culture, global and environmental studies, and other bonding issues.

Several areas of continuing concern persist. (1) Teacher education programs should include media literacy. There is a continued need to enforce NCTE/NCATE guidelines on the use of non-print media in NCATE accreditation and to continue conferences for veteran media teachers to develop their knowledge, ideally a National Media Project. (2) The need persists to critique and oppose infringement of commercial enterprises such as Channel One in the classroom. Such enterprises, lacking from a social and ethical vision of education, are attempts to gain control of the curriculum. (3) Equity and access of media resources continue to be issues even as such resources become more affordable,

due to current inequities in school funding. Many students will be excluded from "hands-on" with various media. Some schools will have limited access to information because they will not be able to afford to subscribe to digitalized encyclopedias. (4) Longitudinal, ethnographic research on media is needed to answer continuing questions of media effects on our personal, social, and political life.

The Commission sees several new areas of interest. (1) With the emergence of national standards, the Commission on Media seeks to become involved in discussions of standard setting efforts by NCTE and others. Media advocates are seeking performance benchmarks--including similarities with traditional curriculum as well as differences--and ways to define and assess media arts competencies. (2) Increasing networking among organizations concerned with media education prompts the commission's advocacy of affiliation with organizations historically associated with media--e.g., with popular culture, television, technology--leading to greater sharing of ideas and resources. (3) "Compositions" as we understand them will undergo significant change with the increase in student media production of visual composition, using CD ROM, hypermedia, and interactive video. Students now teach students through distance education and student-produced materials. Portfolios will consist of audio/video productions that will record student behavior as well as demonstrate what students know and are able to do. (4) Teachers' savvy in getting around restrictions in media use is increasing. There is a continued need to clarify copyright issues, to be aware of the limitations that school districts impose, and to increase teacher control over what they are able to do with media. (5) Selection of texts will change as they move from linear, indepth presentations to highly media-controlled, produced, and developed bits of information and multi-

presentations. What kind of canon-busting and curricular change will result? (6) Documentation problems when researching and writing about media suggest a need to establish, with producers of media, guidelines for identifying media artifacts systematically in order to allow clear bibliographic citations, and to develop a standardized bibliographic form for NCTE's and others' publications. (7) The nature of discourse is changing as new forms of media and new biases emerge, such as talk shows, and rock, rap, and 'new' news, all of which are sources of understanding for youth.

The Commission sees an overarching need to come to grips with the pedagogical implications of multimedia, interactive technologies as they impact the gathering and presentation of ideas, arguments, and information, and to explore ways to center cultural studies in classrooms, especially culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

The Commission on Curriculum (Richard Adler, Director) recognizes continuing positive trends such as teachers using information gained from research and successful classroom practices; involving teachers more extensively in ongoing curriculum development; involving more segments of the public in the curriculum process; implementing curriculum and methodologies that account for and accommodate more pluralism, and applying curriculum that considers different learning styles. Unfortunate trends toward reliance on standardized assessment and instruction, e.g., testing and software packages, continues.

The Commission lists the following issues in English language arts:

The Commission supports the vision of curriculum being responsive to and indeed generated by the learning community. The changing role of families in school decisions requires informing them of the value of new teaching methods and attitudes and designing ways to elicit their support. As regional and national groups meet to formulate curriculum, they must not lose sight of the ultimate responsibility and right of the local schools to design and implement their own curricula.

The Commission emphasizes the conceptualization of curriculum development and staff development as ongoing and continuous. The teaching profession and the community at large need to be aware that the world is changing at an exponential rate. In learner-centered communities, teachers, students and others are all learners and curriculum cannot become fixed. Teachers must have support in developing ways to facilitate meaningful curricula.

The Commission advocates the changing role of talk in the classroom. As the conceptualization of curriculum changes from knowledge transmission to knowledge creation through inquiry, the role of talk within classrooms changes from lecture to conversation. Teachers, students, and others involved in classrooms must be able to use talk for exploration and presentation. Students are increasingly talking to create knowledge and using talk to present and inform. Talk is now viewed as both process and product. Through varied talking experiences, students gain fluency in language functions.

The Commission deplores the proliferation of "electronic workbook" computer software and any technologies geared toward standardization of learners and learning. The use of

technology, especially computers, raises important questions for researchers, national educational organizations, and teacher training institutions: Which new technological devices are best for the classroom? How do teachers use them? How are they integrated into the overall curriculum? How do we avoid misuse of technology with respect to time in the classroom? Staff development will help teachers answer these questions.

The Commission asks that the purpose and content of the traditional required college freshmen composition course be reviewed. In light of the increasing trend of writing across the curriculum in grades K-12, colleges must shift their emphasis from traditional approaches to composition to deal with the sophistication of students who use writing for many functions and to accomplish many purposes.

The Commission applauds teachers taking increasing responsibility for their own professional growth and development and compelling administrative structures to respond to their needs. Collaborative learning and process instruction place additional pressure on teacher education and staff development to emphasize strategies that encourage learners to risk, discover, experiment, negotiate, seek clarification, and critique in classrooms of diverse populations. Teacher development needs to focus on helping teachers develop individual pedagogical philosophies to support their curriculum and instructional choices.

The Commission supports the vision of all grade levels using quality literary texts that reflect cultural and gender diversity. Literature instruction at all levels needs to center

on personal and aesthetic responses rather than requiring answers to factual questions and/or teaching isolated skills. Literature instruction must include choices for both teachers and students, making available a wide range of genres, historical periods, authors, and points of view.

The Commission fully supports the draft document on assessment of literacy developed by IRA and NCTE. Regarding new approaches to evaluation/assessment, the foremost question is which assessment vehicles offer the most valid information about student performance, e.g., portfolios, Primary Language Record, SAT writing assessment, and advanced placement examinations. Other questions include: Who trains staff to use assessment tools? Which results are representative, and how are they reported? To whom are they reported? How can teachers who no longer use grade cards be supported?